INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT

In his own words: President Reagan explains to The Sun where he stands . . . from 'contras' and Congress to Soviet relations to Challenger inquiry

Washington Bureau of The Sun

WASHINGTON - The Sun's interview with President Reagan yesterday was conducted by Washington Bureau chief Ernest B. Furgurson, White House correspondent Robert Timberg, diplomatic correspondent Stephens Broening and military affairs correspondent Charles W. Corddry. Following is a text of the inter-

QUESTION: Mr. President, some members of Congress are proposing a delay in military aid to the "contras" [Nicaraguan rebels] to allow time for another attempt to draw the Sandinistas into negotiations with the contras. Would you accept some delay - if not six months, which I know you don't want - but some delay in providing military aid if that meant Congress would approve your request?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think there's several ways in which things like that are being suggested. First of all, from the time that they would — if they would vote to approve this aid, there would be a period of time before it would actually be carried out. And, yes, if there's any possibility that during that time and perhaps to forestall such aid, that they would then be willing to come to the negotiating table, as we've tried to get them nine times already, and to negotiate with the contras, that would be

But if we're talking about some kind of a compromise where the Congress imposes a delay and takes the trigger away from me in -

Q: You mean like requiring a second vote?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, there would be a second vote, and so forth, I think this would be most counterproductive because the Sandinistas would feel they could hang on longer with the hope that we still wouldn't get what we're asking for.

Q: It sounds like the trigger is the problem. If, for example, a delay of, say, 60 to 75 days, after which the aid would go whether — without a second congressional vote, does that seem like the basis for a compromise to you?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'd be willing to talk to them about something of this kind. I wouldn't want to commit to this because, as I say, the important thing is that the Sandinista government must not be left any loopholes in which they believe there might — there still might be a denial of this help.

Q: So your real problem is the trigger in the second vote?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. yes. They have to know that we mean it and that we're going to help the contras.

Q: Mr. President, some administration officials have said that 18 months of military aid to the contras is all that will be needed to bring the Sandinistas to the negotiating table and that you will not be back for more. Aifonso Robelo, one of the contra leaders who you met

with here last week, has said he doesn't feel that any more than 18 months would be needed and he didn't feel that they would want to prolong the bloodshed there beyond that. What happens after 18 months and the contras have still not forced the Sandinistas to the negotiating table?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think this is something that you have to look at if such a time should come. But I'm

pleased that those men who are most familiar with resources of the contras have that feeling. They have they are acquainted with their ability.

There is no question that when we were able to give them some help, the contras were giving the Sandinista forces great problems. But you've got to remember that for the last couple of years, other than the humanitarian aid, they were shut off. And that's why they're so limited in the numbers. They've got a potential force of around 20,000. There are about 6,000 now fighting in Nicaragua. But this is a matter of the lack of arms and muni-

Q: Well, it does sound, Mr. President, that you're not saying that 18 months is necessarily the end of it and you might, in fact, have to come back for more. Is that correct?

THE PRESIDENT: I would — yes, I think it would be foolish to commit yourself to anything of that kind because this, too, then could stiffen the Sandinistas' resistance and say, "All we have to do is hold out for 18

Q: Mr. President, you have said that the overriding issue in Central America is America's national security. You've also said, if I may quote, "We send money and material now so we'll never have to send our own American boys." is it possible that some day American troops will have to be sent?

THE PRESIDENT: Here's the thing that everyone is overlooking. Here is this third communist — well, let -I can't call it an attempt. Here would be the third of the bases that they had established, the communist bloc, and the first one on our mainland. And they, themselves, have made it plain that they're part of the expansionist philosophy, that Marxian philosophy and belief of one world communist state.

Now, what you have to say is, if we do nothing and this is allowed to grow and expand and carry its revolution across other borders, then the threat would remain that there would come a day when their hostilities would be directed at our own interests. And that is the time in which you could say that, yes, then American forces would be involved because the hostilities were directed

I don't see it as some interpret it that, well, we're leaving the door open — that we may still use troops down there. I don't think we'd have a friend left in Latin America if we used American forces. The image of the great colossus of the north is still too much in their minds. The contras don't want us. They want our help, they want the tools, they made it plain. They will furnish the manpower.